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MIDDLE-CLASS FURNITURE IN THE UNITED STATES.



THE publisher of *The London Cabinet-Maker*, accompanied by one of his artists, visited the United States some months ago to investigate American furniture from the journalistic standpoint, and in an article on middle-class furniture in a late issue of his publication has recorded the results of his investigation. Although the subject under discussion is middle-class furniture, the examples illustrated are by no means the best that could be selected as typical specimens of this grade of goods. Mr. Benn seems to have been attracted more by the oddity of the various specimens that most interested him, rather than the classic proportions of the examples he has not represented. It is natural that this should be so, for it is the foreign eye that is most susceptible to the oddities of things in any country, and in making his selections we ourselves are impressed with peculiarities in our furniture that are to a large degree unobserved, by reason of the fact that they are mixed up with an immense number of designs, some of which

may be inferior, but the vast majority of which are certainly superior and more cosmopolitan in style. We therefore learn from Mr. Benn's selection that there actually is a certain element of provincialism in what we may consider classic purity of style, but he does us the justice to admit that this arises from our allowing full play to our fancy, and that "the result in most cases is refreshingly vigorous."

Each country has its own individuality of taste, and what will strike the American eye as most peculiar in English furniture is the classic rigidity of the designs, much of the furniture having the appearance of being cast in metal rather than made of wood. The English mantelpiece, for example, is a typical example of the subservience to tradition that dominates the English mind, whose cast-iron conventionality of taste admits of no distinction between the mantelpiece of, say the boudoir and that of the banquet-hall, whereas the American designer, less hampered by tradition, however monumental may be his design for the mantelpiece of a dining-room, will certainly in the case of a boudoir adopt a light, dainty, graceful style, more in harmony with the purposes of the apartment.

Mr. Benn emphasizes the fact that most of our middle-class furniture bears the stamp of machinery, "and the impress of that wonderful carving machine which has done so much to place such an enrichment at a discount," but he confesses that "the design and quality of our carving have advanced by leaps and bounds during the past few years, and that the old 'thunder and lightning incising' is seldom allowed to spoil good wood."

"Taking the goods in the usual catalogue order," says Mr.

Benn, "demands first attention. The revival of the grandfather's clock has taken place in the States with, perhaps, greater earnestness than on this side. Dozens of imposing clocks of the style of Fig. 2, or even more ornate, are to be found in leading establishments. The hall is made much of over there, and in many respects the furniture is more sprightly, varied, and, I think, more suitable than ours. They delight in high-back chairs and picturesque hall settles — 'settees' they call them. For a type of the chairs take the pattern in Fig. 3. Nicely carved, and strongly made out of well-figured wood, it makes an attractive and suitable seat for the hall. That shown by Fig. 5 is another type which is more common and not ungraceful. Figs. 8 and 10 are plainer examples of these sentinel-like hall seats, and the latter is, I think, a capital pattern for a smooth and simple article of that class. The settees used for these cosy American halls are not less original or useful. Two patterns are shown in Figs. 3 and 5, and it would be difficult to imagine more shapely benches for the lobby of an unpretentious house. There is a freedom of line and a comfort about them which are distinctly in advance of our ordinary square and hard hall settle. Fig. 5 is a particularly happy design, being not only comely but very useful, owing to the commodious box which is placed under the seat. The ordinary style of 'every-day' hatstand may be judged from Fig. 4. This article is called over there a 'hall tree,' a name which probably survives from the day when a branch from the forest used to stand in the corner of the log hut and do duty as a hatstand, which is all very well when the article is free of apparel, but when the 'tree' is loaded with coats it is, of course, next to impossible to use such a seat."

"Our friends across the Atlantic are very skillful in devising all sorts of little combination dwarf bookcases, secretaires, and contrivances for the study, or bachelor's room. Fig. 9 is an example of this sort of thing, and a very handy and useful article it makes. Its height is about sixty-five inches and width thirty-six inches.

"The name of their secretarial appliances is legion. No reception-room is considered complete without some such writing accommodation as Fig. 9, or, better still, Fig. 12. It will be admitted, I think, that the latter makes a very pretty writing-table, a distinct improvement on the old French model from which it is taken. The prices at which these 'Ladies' Desks,' as they are named, are made is very surprising. They can be obtained in a great variety of woods, such as white bird's-eye maple, mahogany, or quartered oak. The beautiful woods which American forests produce give

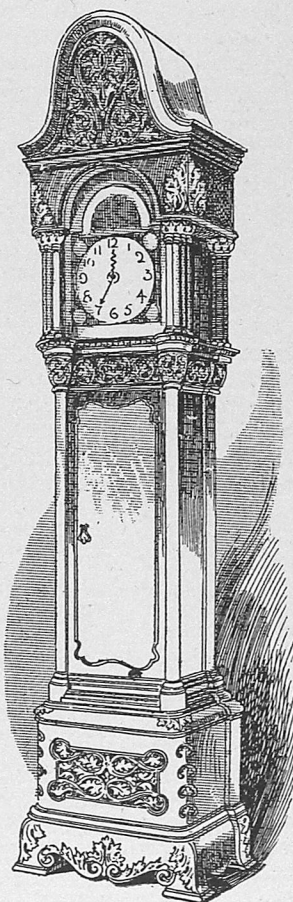


FIG. 2. HALL CLOCK,

that country a considerable 'start' in the manufacture of any luxuries made of wood."

"While speaking of carcase work, I may direct attention to the unaffected little sideboard, Fig. 14. There is a wholesome restraint about this article which used to be unknown in America with regard to such goods.

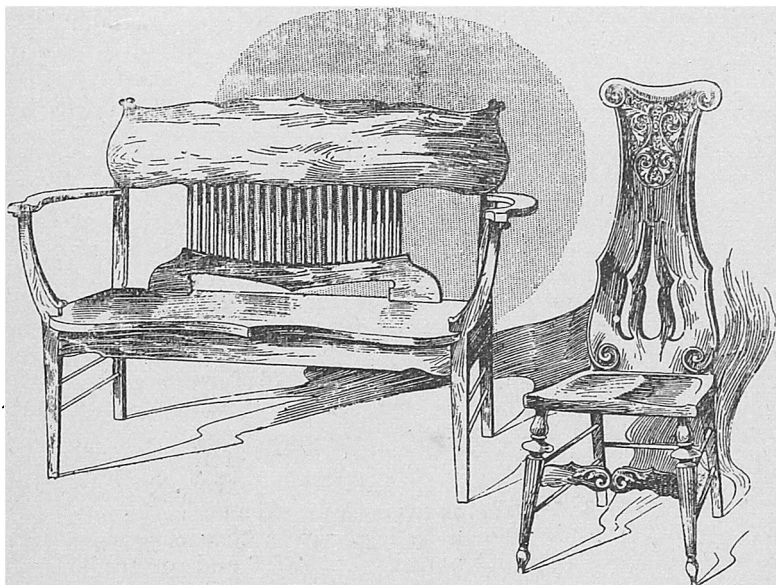


FIG. 3. SETTEE AND HALL CHAIR IN CARVED OAK.

This class of furniture is called by the Americans the 'Colonial style.' It is manifestly a mere 'ringing of the changes' on the ideas of our old friends, Chippendale, Heppelwhite and Sheraton, and some of the changes are very pretty. Several of these patterns are to be credited to the Grand Rapids Chair Company, Michigan, notably Figs. 3, 4, 5, 8, 10, 12 and 14.

"The easy-chair is a great institution in the United States. When the custom of supporting the feet on the mantel shelf dropped, something had to be done to provide comfort-giving lounges, guaranteed to

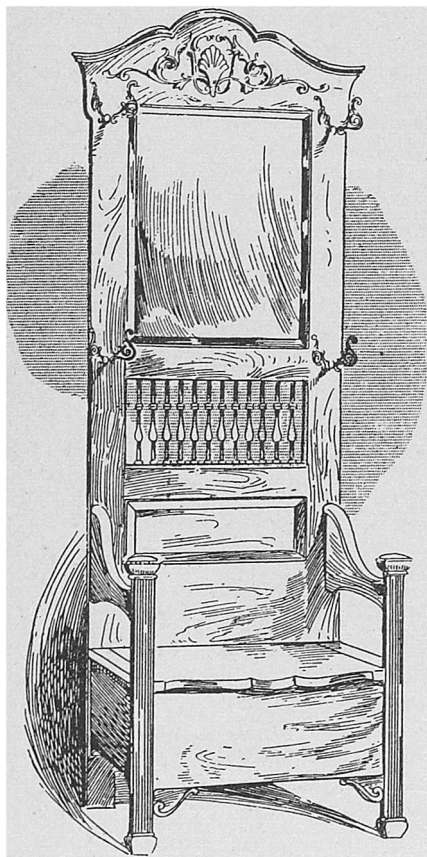


FIG. 4. "EVERYDAY" HALL STAND.

give the largest luxury in the least time. I shall have more to say of these easy-chairs later on, but in the meantime direct attention to Fig. 6, which represents perhaps the most popular of the easy-chair tribe. It is after a model to which Mr. William Morris lent his name, and most cultured families are not happy until they obtain a duly certified copy of the poet's favorite lounge. Turning to the other chairs

in this series, a word of explanation is necessary with respect to their style, for therein we discover something which is rather new. The American architects have, of late years, taken a remarkable fancy to the Romanesque style, and every great street throughout the country is now being adorned with masterly examples of various phases of 'Byzantine.' The style lends itself admirably to the enormous masses of steel, bricks and stone, fifteen to twenty stories high, which the business men of the States are demanding. Romanesque has, however, passed on to domestic residences, and so much furniture has now the necessary 'feeling' to enable it to accord with the architecture. With this explanation it will be easier to understand the chairs shown in Figs. 11 and 13. Both these designs are, perhaps, too ponderous for ordinary use; but yet it will be seen that they are not without originality and dignity. Fig. 13 is more typical, and is certainly a very comfortable and attractive chair. In the back will be seen the Romanesque carving, which is 'all the fashion,' and which I have tried to describe. In working out this vein, the Americans are producing many ideas which would 'take' in the English market. But I shall have another opportunity of returning to this new departure."

"In this article I have intentionally taken the ordinary goods which furnish the home of the business man. Judged from that standpoint, it will, I think, be seen that the New World is not far behind the old. Indeed, I am convinced that if many of these things could be planted in English showrooms, at anything like the prices which I heard quoted, it would go hard with some of our native productions. The advantages which the Americans possess in machinery, choice woods, and, alas! cheap labor, will tell heavily against British cabinet-makers if serious competition is attempted. In the meantime, a word to the wise is enough.

"These illustrations will show that the American people are studying 'beauty in the home, even in the lower middle-class section of society. It is true that their manners and customs are largely affected by their constant association with their beloved Paris. But it is pleasant to notice that the traditions of the English "home" still survive, especially in such places as Boston, Washington and Philadelphia. The 'lady of the house' in the States is a more self-reliant person than her sister in this country. She generally scorns to lean upon the judgment of a man or seek his advice in furnishing matters. With a method and skill which are altogether amazing, she carries on 'Home Rule' in the most perfect—but not irritating—fashion. The natural taste, combined with a native originality, displayed by many American

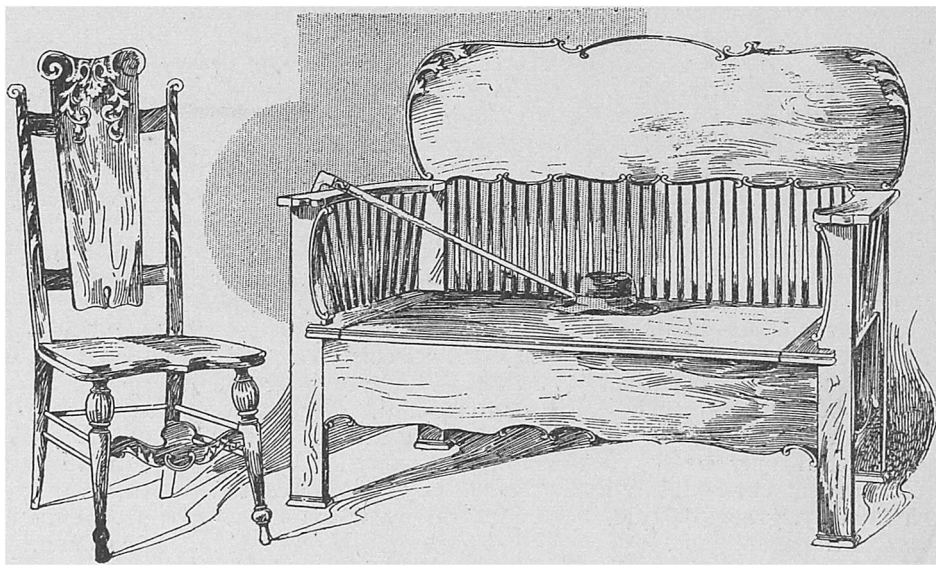


FIG. 5. SETTEE AND HALL CHAIR IN CARVED OAK.

women cannot but command respect. One may dislike their self-assertiveness and deplore their intenseness, but one cannot help at the same time admiring their skill as domestic tacticians, and their keen appreciation and rendering of much that is elevating and beautiful. The development of American interiors will depend largely on the interest taken by the women of this most progressive country in decorative art."

THE EVOLUTION OF LAMPS.

BY EDWARD C. WEAVER.



ONE of the interesting collections of the National Museum at Washington is of lamps. Mr. Walter Gough, the assistant curator of the department of ethnology, has spent a great deal of time and study in so arranging the old and new specimens that they present an intelligible thread of development. In the east hall, among numerous tableaux showing the rise of civilization, this new collection occupies several cases on the main aisle. Although years have passed since the specimens have been coming in from all

torch carried by an Indian represents the earliest effort of aboriginal man to fathom the depths of darkness before him, and to save his toes contact with the rocking-chair. These torches were fat pine twigs twisted together and fired by sparks created by the frictional rubbing of bark or sticks. There is no doubt that this same savage, while watching a fat 'possum or other toothsome morsel simmering and stewing before an open fire, noticed that the fierce heat boiled out the odorous fat, which, dropping upon the wood of the fire, made it burn brighter and brisker. This was the first candle—a piece of wood with fat around it, which later, in the far north, became a fish or bird with a torch sticking through it.

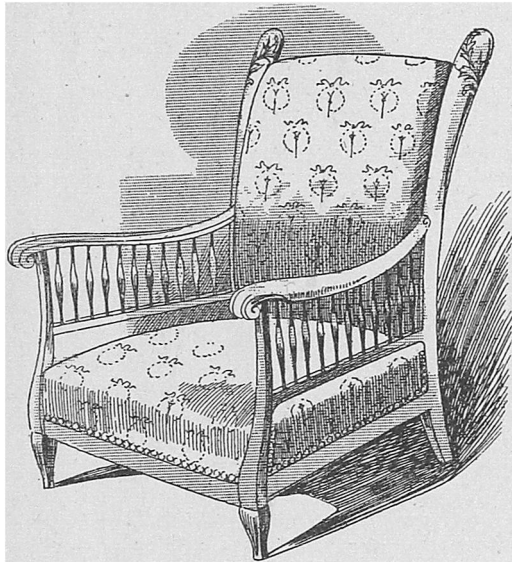


FIG. 6. CHAIR AFTER THE MORRIS IDEAL.

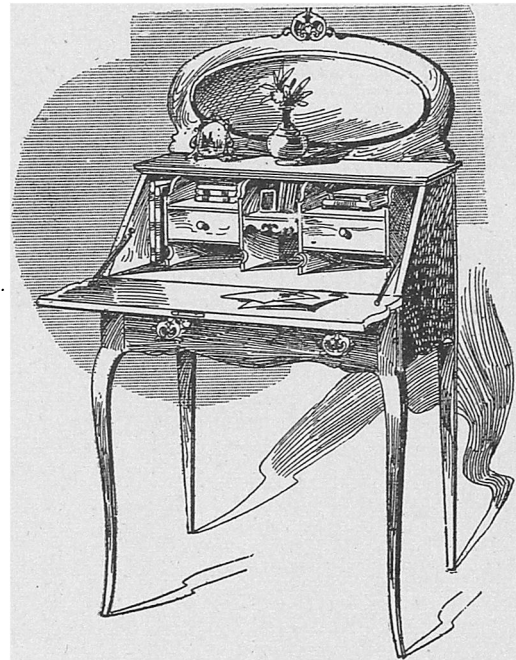


FIG. 7. COLONIAL WRITING-DESK.

parts of the earth, it has not been till a recent reorganization that the series of many torches, lanterns and lamps have been arranged with any idea of their co-relation.

In the long period of development that has led up to our present systems of illumination America is found at both ends of the string. While the arc light is probably the finest type of light-producers upon a large scale, it is also true that a

In the South Sea Islands the natives string oily nuts upon a splinter, which is kept burning through their religious services, and the Malays improve upon this by using bundles of resin wrapped in palm leaves, while the early English and Scandinavians used rushes dipped in melted fat. They afterwards wrapped cloth fibre in rolls of wax and thus invented the candle of our time. The first use of a candle in

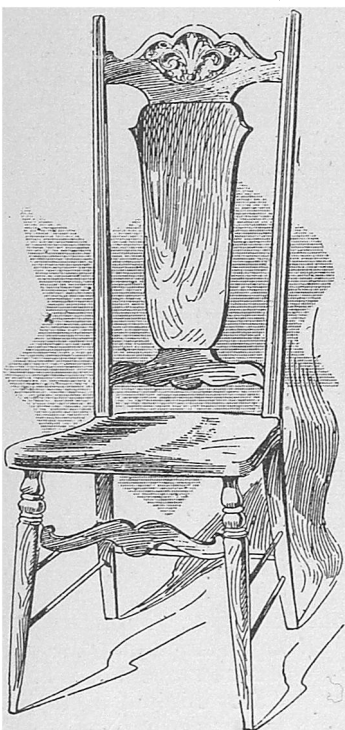


FIG. 8. HALL CHAIR.



FIG. 9. SECRETAIRE-BOOKCASE.

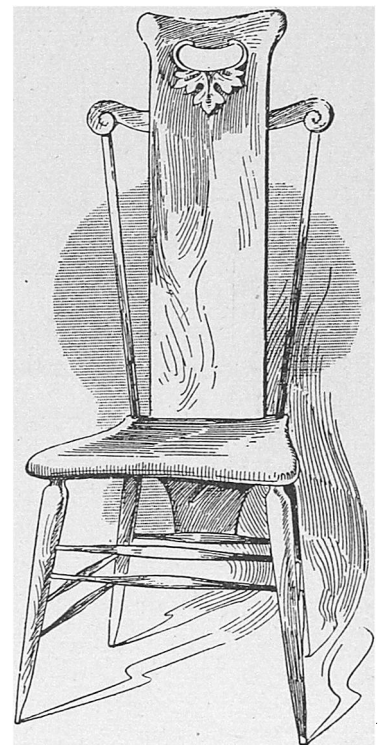


FIG. 10. HALL CHAIR.

China and Japan is, however, so long ago that there is no record of it, being lost in the past of a nation that has a history of fifty centuries. In the most of countries, however, the use of candles begins about the same date that animals are domesticated and the honey-bee is introduced.

With the lamp, as well as the candle, the earliest forms

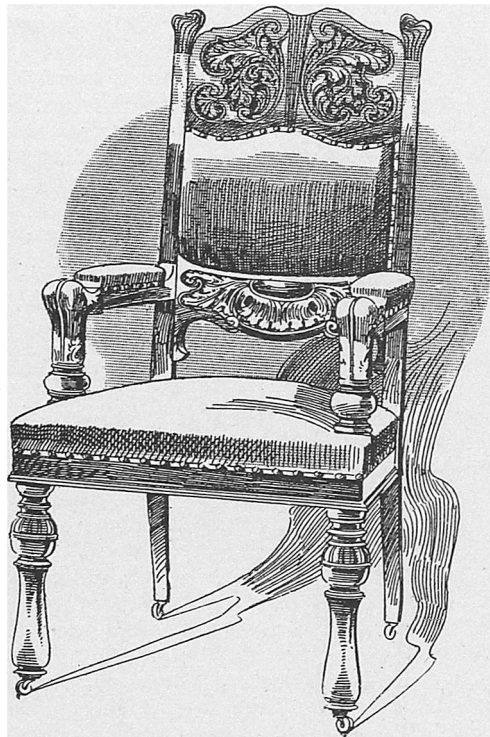


FIG. 11. ROMANESQUE CHAIR.

are to be found among the aborigines of our own country. The Esquimaux find a stone upon the beach with a natural depression in it, which they fill with seal fat and use a sort of moss as a wick. This is repeated by the early people of many other countries, the next step toward the improvement of the oil vessel being an irregular clay saucer. In America turnips hollowed out have been used for this purpose, while

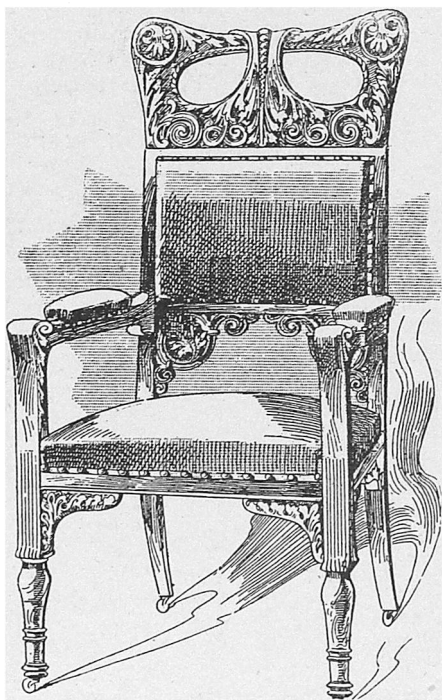


FIG. 13. ROMANESQUE CHAIR.

among the Dutch people of Pennsylvania there are to be found to-day pans with tallow wicks. The genealogy of the lamp may now be traced through a long line of Roman specimens, beginning with rough clay bowls filled with oil, from the sides of which depended the wicks. Then, one day, the potter in his work pinched a sort of lip upon one side of the

saucer and discovered that it made an elegant place for the wick to rest, and later another lip was found a very useful appendage for the purpose of handling the lamp. Finally this develops into the classic lamp with an orificed spout and ornately-curved handle—lamps that have lit the studies of Cicero and heated the curling-irons of Cleopatra.

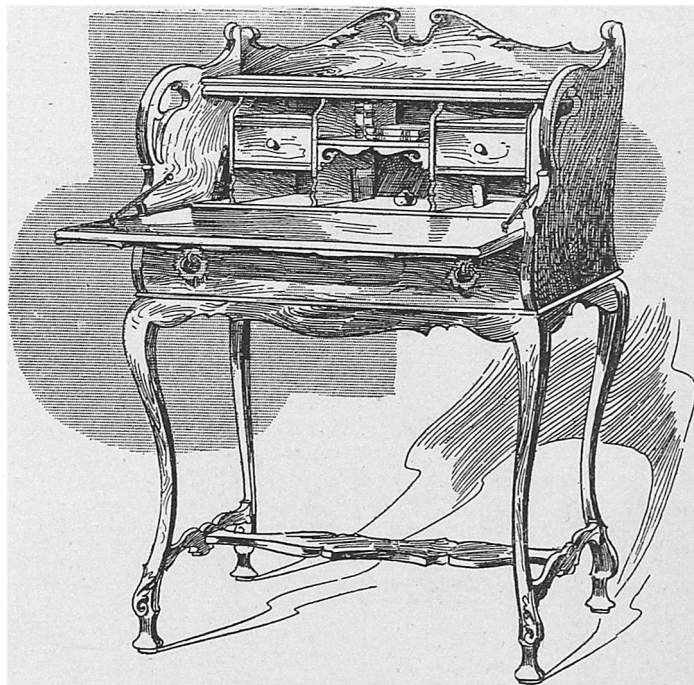


FIG. 12. WRITING-DESK ON FRENCH LINES.

The Italians continued in the line of improvement, molding similar forms in iron and then into bronze—the metal of the artist—and the designs became objects to strive for, and some of the specimens are in the fullest artistic sense ornamental. The feature of the collection is several beautiful lamps from the old Pompeiian city—lamps that tell a tale of wealth and luxury and typify that delightful people whose

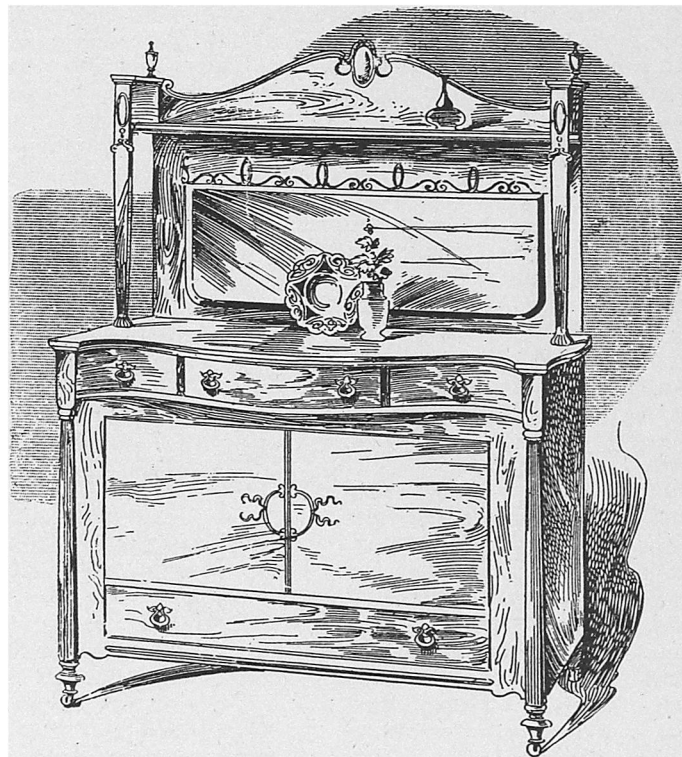


FIG. 14. COLONIAL SIDEBOARD.

entire time and talent was expended to enjoy. From tripods swung these artistic lamps, filled with perfumed oils, the precursor of the banquet lamp. Other specimens are those found in the catacombs, and tell the story of the religious light that was kept secretly burning below the surface of the earth—the life of denial and ideality.